



## NOAA FISHERIES SERVICE

# Frequently Asked Questions about Marine Mammal Rescue and Intervention Plans in Response to the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill

## What species of marine mammals have been seen swimming in oiled areas?

Of the 21 offshore and coastal cetacean (whales and dolphins) species in the Gulf of Mexico, several have been observed swimming through oil in both coastal and offshore waters. Aerial surveys have observed Risso's dolphins, spinner dolphins, bottlenose dolphins, and sperm whales, species commonly found in deep-water habitats, swimming in oil in offshore waters. Coastal cetacean species, such as bottlenose dolphins, have been observed with tar balls attached to them and seen swimming through oil slicks closer to shore and inland bays. Coastal bottlenose dolphins are routinely found traveling, socializing, and feeding very close to shore and inland bays, sounds, and estuarine habitats.



## What species of marine mammals have stranded in the "designated oil spill area" thus far?

As of July 22, 2010, most of the marine mammals found stranded alive or dead in the "designated spill area" (which currently encompasses the coastline from the Texas/Louisiana border to Apalachicola (Franklin County), Florida) have been bottlenose dolphins (2 alive and 59 dead). This is not surprising in the southeastern United States where, historically, bottlenose dolphins are the most commonly stranded marine mammal species along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts. Other species of cetaceans that have stranded include four spinner dolphins (an offshore species) along the panhandle of Florida; two decomposed dolphins from the Genus *Stenella* (offshore dolphins) in Louisiana; and one sperm whale found floating dead and very decomposed in offshore waters. No manatees have been found stranded.



The cause of death for these animals is still being investigated. Although, these marine mammals stranded within the designated oil spill impact area, their death may be due to other factors. Samples are collected from dead and live stranded animals, when logistically possible, to help determine whether these animals were exposed to and/or ingested oil.



## Can dolphins and whales detect and avoid the oil?

Historically, research on dolphins in human care has shown captive bottlenose dolphins avoid oil on the surface of the water; however, wild dolphins and whales have been documented swimming, feeding, and socializing in oiled water during this and previous oil spills in the Gulf of Mexico.

## Are the numbers of stranded marine mammals during this oil spill event higher than normal?

In fact, prior to the oil spill the stranding rate for dolphins and manatees in 2010 was higher than previous years. Marine mammal strandings during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill event and in the designated spill area continue to be higher than in recent years for the similar timeframe. This may be due to increased detection and reporting, the lingering effects of the earlier observed spike in strandings for the winter of 2010, and/or the impacts of the oil spill.



## What is NOAA's position on intervening to protect marine wildlife from human-caused situations?

Animals in distress resulting from human activities are prime candidates for rescue or intervention (capture and transport to a rehabilitation facility). This includes animals entangled in fishing gear or marine debris, injured from a vessel collision, trapped in an area resulting from human activities (*e.g.*, physical barriers, construction noise, etc.), or impacted by oil spills.

## Can NOAA pro-actively move or rescue marine mammals before they encounter oil?

Efforts to capture or move cetaceans pose significant challenges due to their size, mass, strength, and agility in the water. Moving or relocating healthy dolphins to areas that are not oiled poses significant health and safety concerns for the animals and is not guaranteed to provide a greater chance of survival than leaving them in their natural habitat. Specifically, relocating a dolphin involves capturing a free-swimming animal, which is usually only attempted as a measure of last resort because of the danger to the animal and rescue personnel. Other issues that would need to be considered are:

- translocation could overcrowd areas with more dolphins than the habitat can support;
- translocations could alter the infectious disease ecology of the population or the individuals; and
- translocations might subject dolphins to poor-quality habitats with insufficient food and shelter needs.

Rescuing healthy animals to place them in rehabilitation facilities to prevent potential impacts from the oil is also not desirable because it causes stress to the animal and introduces health problems that could cause the animal's condition to deteriorate. Thus, proactively catching healthy animals could do more harm than good.

## Can bottlenose dolphins be herded, contained, and hand-fed in oil-free areas or secluded bays to prevent potential impacts from the oil?

Herding into and containing dolphins in secluded bays are not appropriate rescue techniques during this event because they may cause more harm than good. There is no guarantee dolphins would remain in the new environment or that the environment would support their needs for prey, predator avoidance, rearing calves, etc. Herding efforts could also cause undue stress to the animals, or they may head into oiled areas instead, thereby, inadvertently worsening the situation.

Containing wild dolphins in secluded bays and hand feeding them until the oil is cleaned up is also not practical or logistically feasible, poses several serious health and behavior risks to the animals, and would cause more long-term harm than good. In addition to being illegal under the [Marine Mammal Protection Act](#), hand feeding wild dolphins may cause long-term dependency on humans for food, causing dolphins to lose their natural hunting and survival skills. Hand feeding also creates other types of injuries including increased boat propeller strikes, entanglement in fishing gear, and teaching calves to seek food from people.

## When should NOAA intervene to aid a marine mammal that may be in distress?

NOAA Fisheries Service and the Wildlife Branch of the Unified Command will evaluate whether intervention is necessary for *free swimming* dolphins in distress in coastal areas. Evaluation includes monitoring the animal(s) to estimate age/size, body condition, and behavior; and consulting with marine mammal experts and veterinarians to determine if the animal is debilitated and unlikely to survive on its own. If a dolphin is in distress in an oiled area, intervention may be implemented if the following conditions are met:

1. It is safe to intervene based on the presence/amount/type of oil in the water and the capture effort can take place safely for rescue personnel and for the animal.
2. The animal is not in a suitable habitat and is unable to return to a suitable habitat on its own due to health, human, or physical barriers (such as distance to an oil free area or behind a berm).
3. The animal is debilitated and likely to die if no intervention takes place.
4. The animal is in an accessible area for mounting a response and is likely to be found in that area on the day of rescue.

Experienced personnel from the marine mammal stranding networks are on-call 24 hours a day and seven days a week and will be deployed as soon as possible to help intervene with animals in need. The speed of intervention will depend on the remoteness of the animal in relation to the response teams.



## Are there differences between intervening for whales and dolphins and in coastal versus offshore waters?

Coastal species, such as bottlenose dolphins, found near shore and in shallow water are much easier to handle and less prone to capture stress than offshore species, such as spinner or striped dolphins. Offshore species are especially prone to “capture shock” during capture and transport, putting them at high risk of injury or death. Coastal and offshore species of dolphins found debilitated but free-swimming in oiled areas will be candidates for intervention provided the safety needs of the animals and rescue team members can be met. However, intervention for offshore species *cannot* safely occur for these species far away from land because of the numerous risks associated with capturing dolphins in deep water, as well as locating and transporting them great distances to land-based facilities.

There will be no attempts to intervene with free swimming large whales in oil spill affected areas (except in life-threatening entanglement cases), as there are neither capture methods that are safe to deploy for free swimming large whales, transport equipment, nor rehabilitation facilities in the Southeast US equipped to handle the size and mass of these animals.

## Why is response and rescue of marine mammals different than for sea turtles?

Capturing dolphins poses significant logistical challenges that can impede rescue efforts, while smaller animals, like some sea turtles, are relatively easy to retrieve and transport to rehabilitation facilities. Sea turtles also do very well in rehab, and can be de-oiled, rehabilitated, and released in an oil-free area relatively quickly. Dolphins that strand alive on land can often be transported to a rehabilitation facility; however, dolphins free swimming in an oiled area are extremely difficult to catch, and the stress of a capture operation may place the animals at high risk of injury or death.

Dolphins that are reported in distress will be monitored and their behavior and health assessed to determine whether intervention is warranted and feasible. Captures of free-swimming dolphins are usually only attempted as a measure of last resort.

## What are physical and behavioral signs that a dolphin may be in distress?

Some indicators that dolphins may be in distress include:

- behavioral changes, such as decreased feeding and social activity;
- abnormal behavior, such as listing to one side, not moving away when approached, being non-responsive and/or not paying attention to stimuli, and/or lethargy;
- labored breathing or other respiratory distress; and
- declining body and skin condition (becoming thinner, appearance of skin lesions) over a period of days or weeks of monitoring.

Additionally, common signs of stress in dolphins include loud exhalation at the water surface (chuffing); repeated tail slapping; and erratic swimming at the surface. These behaviors may be displayed in response to loud noises, close approaches from boats, and other negative stimuli; and therefore, do not necessarily indicate the animal is reacting to oil in the water.



*A dolphin showing significant weight loss, evident by the severe depression at the blowhole and visible ribs. This picture was taken in Sarasota, Florida, and the weight loss is not a result of the oil spill. Photo Credit: Chicago Zoological Society's Sarasota Dolphin Research Program.*



*Two dolphins swimming in Perdido Bay, Alabama showing good body condition. The picture was taken on June 27, 2010 in Perdido Bay, Alabama. Photo Credit: NOAA*

### How can I tell the difference between normal dolphin behaviors and those indicating distress?

Natural behaviors are sometimes easily confused with distress behavior. Natural behaviors include resting, socializing or playing, traveling, maternal care, or various feeding activities. For example, dolphins have many strategies to catch fish, such as “strand” or “mud” feeding where they herd fish into shallow areas to feed. To those unfamiliar with this behavior it can seem alarming since the dolphins often work in very shallow water and actually beach themselves as they chase fish onto shore.



*Bottlenose dolphins engaged in normal “strand feeding” behavior. The animals are not in distress and can get back to deeper water on their own.*

Please see the [Dolphin SMART Wild Dolphin Behaviors Fact Sheet](#) detailing and illustrating natural behaviors.



## Can people other than authorized NOAA officials intervene to help marine mammals in distress?

Under the provisions of the Marine Mammal Protection Act, Federal, state, and local officials are authorized to help marine mammals in distress as part of their official duties. Members of the authorized Marine Mammal Stranding Network are also approved to assist animals in need. Members of the public who discover sick, injured or stranded marine mammals should call the Wildlife Hotline immediately at **1-866-557-1401** to report the situation and request assistance. Under no circumstances should members of the public take pre-emptive measures and try to herd, coax, entice, lure, corral or capture animals. Unauthorized disturbance of marine mammals would be considered harassment and a violation of the Marine Mammal Protection Act, subject to enforcement action.

## How can the public help?

The public can help marine mammal conservation efforts during the oil spill crisis in three main ways:

1. Reporting any dead, injured, or distressed bird, sea turtle, or marine mammal to the **Wildlife Hotline at 1-866-557-1401**. If possible, pictures and photographs documenting the report are extremely valuable.
2. Preventing any additional harm or human impacts to marine mammals, especially bottlenose dolphins that live in habitats closer to shore. If you encounter a bottlenose dolphin in the wild, please view them responsibly from at least 50 yards away and do not attempt touch, pet, or feed them. For more information on responsible viewing, please visit [NOAA Fisheries Services' Southeast Regional Viewing Guidelines](#).
3. Following these “do’s and don’ts” if you come across a stranded or beached marine mammal:
  - DON'T push the animal back out to sea. Stranded marine mammals may be sick or injured. Returning animals to sea delays examination and treatment and often results in the animal re-stranding in worse condition.
  - If the animal returns to the water on its own, DON'T attempt to swim with it.
  - DO put human safety above animal safety. If conditions are dangerous, do not attempt to approach the animal.
  - DO stay with the animal until rescuers arrive, but use caution. Marine mammals can be dangerous and/or carry disease. Keep a safe distance from the head and tail. Also, minimize contact with the animal (use gloves if necessary) and avoid inhaling the animal's expired air.
  - If the animal is alive, DO keep its skin moist and cool by splashing water over its body. Use wet towels to help keep the skin moist and prevent sunburn.
  - If the animal is alive, DON'T cover or obstruct the blowhole. Try to keep sand and water away from the blowhole.
  - DO keep crowds away and noise levels down to avoid causing further stress to the animal.
  - DO report all dead marine mammals, even if they are decomposed.
  - DO keep dogs/pets away from the live or dead marine mammal.
  - DON'T collect any parts (tissues, teeth, bones, etc.) from dead animals. They are still covered by the Marine Mammal Protection Act.